

away. Witnesses said the building was lifted into the air.

When it came crashing down, its victims were buried in a mass of steel, concrete, brick and debris. Frantic parents, neighbors, oil-field roughnecks, and volunteers around the State ranging from Boy Scouts to Texas Rangers converged on the devastating scene. Many dug with nothing but their bare hands.

Men, women and children worked all through the night battling rain, fatigue and unimaginable grief. They worked to reach those buried underneath the mountain of twisted metal. Within 17 hours, all of the debris had been heroically removed, and all victims had been located.

A cenotaph, a tall monument, stands silently in New London across from the disaster site bearing the names of the 296 students, teachers and visitors who instantly lost their lives. The subsequent death count from injuries sustained that day brought the final count to 311.

Within weeks, the Texas legislature passed a law requiring that an odor be added to natural gas. That practice quickly spread worldwide, saving countless lives in the aftermath of that devastating loss. Now the odor added to natural gas is unmistakable and allows anyone to know instantly there is a leak requiring caution and repair.

This weekend we will have a formal observance, and it will be my honor to be with those amazing people of New London, Texas. We will pay tribute to those hundreds of young lives whose faces were full of hope and promise one moment, yet left lifeless moments later.

We will also honor those who heroically fought to rescue the victims, while we lend sympathy to those who bore the burden of tragic loss. We also honor those who have survived that day when their lives were forever changed.

May God bless their memory, may God heal the wounded memories, and may God bless those who have carried on in New London, Texas, ever since that heartbreaking day.

END PRACTICE OF EARMARKS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Arizona (Mr. FLAKE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FLAKE. Mr. Speaker, today, President Obama made two major announcements. First, he wants serious earmark reform. In particular, he wants to get rid of earmarks that represent no-bid contracts to private companies.

Second, he will sign the \$410 billion omnibus spending bill containing nearly 9,000 earmarks, several thousand of which represent no-bid contracts to private companies. It should not go unnoticed that the announcement to rein in earmarks was made to great fanfare when the ceremony to sign the ear-

mark-laden omnibus into law was taking place in a quiet room away from public view.

So, Mr. Speaker, as much as we know we need adult supervision around here on the earmark question, I think it's safe to say that we are on our own. We can't expect the President to help us out that much. This is not a criticism of this President. The last President talked a lot about earmark reform but didn't carry a very big stick. In the end, he left it to us, and we didn't reform the process. We are in that same position today.

Mr. Speaker, the bill that's being signed into law today contains thousands and thousands of no-bid contracts to private companies. Many of those no-bid contracts to private companies will go to clients of the PMA Group, a lobbying firm that is currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice. Yet we continued. We let it go in this bill.

So I think those of us who worry that we are not going to be serious about earmark reform this coming session have reason to be worried, despite the announcements to get serious about the prospect both by the President and by the Democratic majority here.

Let me just tell you a little about the scope of the problem we face. I have here 83 pages. These represent certification letters that Members of Congress write in order to request an earmark. These requests were made for the 2009 defense bill which we passed in September of last year without any debate where somebody could challenge any one of the earmarks which were more than 2,000 in that piece of legislation.

These 83 I hold in my hand now were requests for earmarks made to clients of the PMA Group, again the firm that is under investigation by the Department of Justice. In every one of these cases, a private company is listed here to receive the earmark.

I will just read through a couple. This is one where the recipient of this earmark is to go to Ocean Power Technologies located at Pier 21 in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Here is another. This one is to go to L-3 Communications Systems project located in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Here is another for Parametric Technology Corporation located at 140 Kendrick Street, Needham, Massachusetts.

There is another for General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems, Scranton Operations in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

These are all no-bid contracts to private companies. They are all to clients of the PMA Group.

In every case here, in all 83, those who requested these earmarks for these private companies, these no-bid contracts, then received, or before, in every case here, received a contribution either from executives at the PMA Group or the PAC operated from the PMA Group.

So we have a problem here, Mr. Speaker, that we need to address. Now, there were some reforms that have been outlined today saying that no-bid contracts will have to be competitively bid. If these no-bid contracts, if these companies are actually listed and the Federal agencies receive these requests and then bid it out, then it's not an earmark anymore.

So we have a bit of a misnomer here or something that doesn't quite make sense. But I think a lot of us who have been around here a while are justifiably skeptical that this will actually take place. Most of us were here in January of 2007 when the new majority outlined some earmark reforms in terms of transparency and accountability.

But we all in the past 2 years have realized that new rules are only as good as your willingness to enforce them, and these rules have gone unenforced.

Mr. Speaker, let's have some real earmark reform.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A message in writing from the President of the United States was communicated to the House by Ms. Evans, one of his secretaries.

FINANCIAL CONDITION OF OUR NATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 18, 2007, the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. AKIN) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. AKIN. Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to be able to join you and my colleagues here today. Our topic today is something that is on the minds of Americans everywhere. It's the question of our economy, the seriousness of the recession and the steps that we are taking, whether they are constructive or destructive to repairing the financial condition of our Nation, our allies and of the world.

I suppose it goes without saying that the recession is something that's serious. We can look at it in various different ways because it affects each of us in different ways.

We could look at it from the fact that there are people who are husbands that have wives and children, who have mortgages that are due and no job and their bank account, already seriously whittled down, is shrinking even farther.

We have those who have even been thrown out of their homes, those who have lost all of the money that they had saved for retirement, their 401(k)s are becoming 101(k)s. And it has a troubling aspect that we don't have any idea when is it going to let up and what will be the end of this ride, as the stock market goes down and down and people continue to suffer.

One of the things we have heard about over the last 6 years from our